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A. Lincoln

Commander in Chief

Abraham Lincoln was an extremely able commander in chief, but few Americans in 1861, or even in 1863, recognized Lincoln's genius for military strategy.

Whereas Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, was a West Point graduate and Mexican War hero, Lincoln had virtually no previous military experience. Indeed, he often joked about his brief army career: four months' service (April-July, 1832) with several rag-tag militia companies in the Black Hawk War. Elected captain by his New Salem friends, Lincoln inspired more humor than gallantry as a leader of men. Once, when marching his company toward a narrow gate, he forgot the correct command to form his troops in a single column so they could advance. "Halt!" Lincoln finally shouted. "This company will break ranks for two minutes and form again on the other side of the gate." In contrast to Davis, Lincoln was a civilian by habit, experience, and vision. Yet this background served the Railsplitter well later when he led the citizen soldiers who fought in the Civil War.

Lincoln succeeded as a military leader because he grasped the fundamentals of modern war. Unlike many journalists and politicians, Lincoln recognized that the Civil War would be a long, bloody struggle. He understood that the North could win the war only if it used effectively its vast superiority in manpower, transportation, and supply. In the first three years of the war, however, Lincoln failed to find a field commander who would exploit these advantages. Instead, the President entrusted the Union military fortunes to a string of ineffectual Generals—Irvin McDowell, George B. McClellan, Ambrose E. Burnside, John Pope and others. Time and time again in 1862 Lincoln urged McClellan to attack the Confederates. Rebuking the General for his continual delays, Lincoln finally wrote: "I have just read your despatch about sore-tongued and fatigued horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigues anything?" The road to Union victory was cleared when Lincoln finally placed military command in the hands of Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman. Like Lincoln, these generals realized that the Union could be preserved only if it fought a total war. Anything less would result in Confederate independence.

Compared with the battle plans proposed by his early advisors, Lincoln's strategy was bold, imaginative, and aggressive. He ordered several simultaneous offensives— in different theatres—designed to crush the South. Insisting that civilian authorities have a voice in the direction of the Northern war effort, Lincoln hounded his generals to maintain constant pressure on the entire periphery of the Confederacy until a weak spot emerged. Lincoln urged upon his commanders the importance of defeating the enemy's armies, crushing its industrial base, and destroying its will to fight. The President was less concerned with occupying Southern territory than with winning the war.

Expediency shaped Lincoln's military thought. He recognized that he had to break with the old tenets of war. Among the President's more radical moves was his decision to free and arm the slaves. With this bold strike at the South's "peculiar institution" Lincoln accomplished three goals: he provided needed manpower (178,895 black soldiers) for the Union armies; he weakened the South's labor force; and he inspired Afro-Americans, North and South, to suppress the rebellion. Other innovations reveal Lincoln's understanding of the concept of total war. He authorized the devastating marches led by Sherman in Georgia and North Carolina, and by Philip H. Sheridan in Virginia. Late in the war he refused to exchange prisoners with the Confederacy. Each rebel soldier returned to his unit, reasoned Lincoln, would help prolong the war. Lincoln also was the first commander in chief to declare medicines contraband of war. But Lincoln's most important legacy as a strategist was his establishment of the modern command system: a commander in chief (Lincoln) to establish overall strategy; a general in chief (Grant) to implement plans; and a chief of staff (Henry W. Halleck) to relay information. Thus Lincoln, without recognizing his long-range contribution to our modern command system, laid its foundation in 1864.
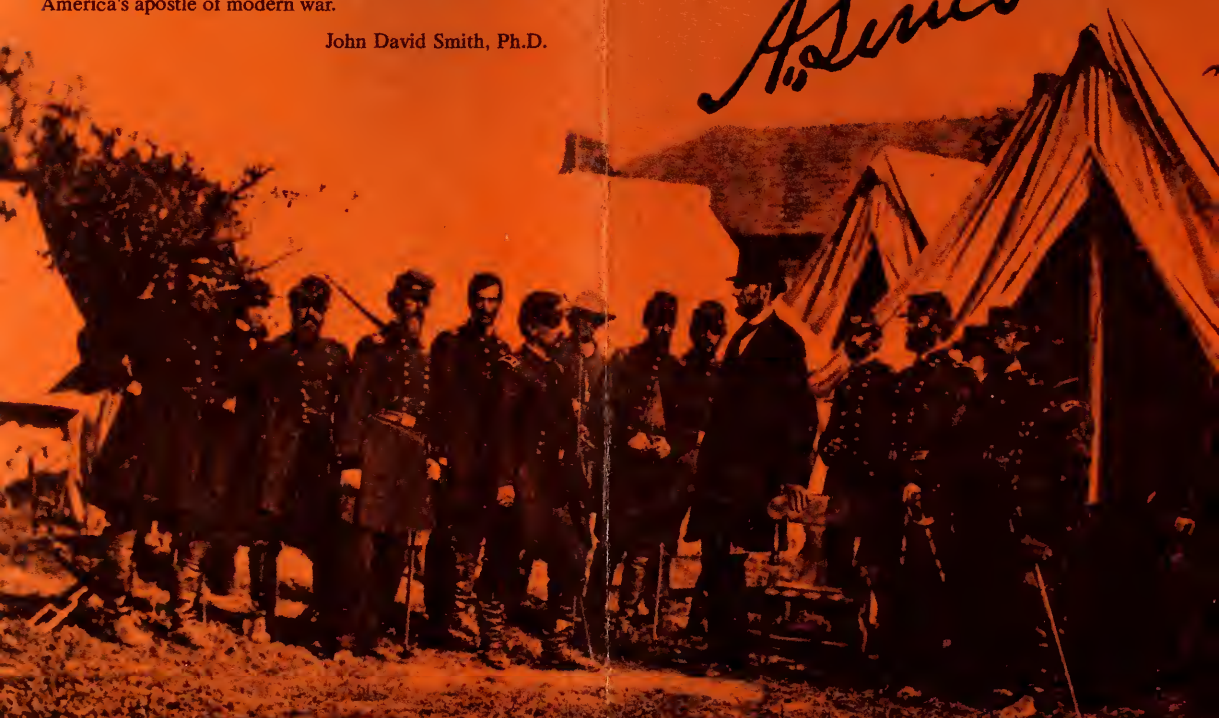
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Although Lincoln made mistakes as a war leader, he
learned from them and never looked back. Lincoln grew
as a strategist; he asked questions; he read; he probed—
anything within his power to shorten the war. Ironically
it was Lincoln, a most unlikely military man, who became
America's apostle of modern war.

John David Smith, Ph.D.

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